

**A** one-horse town. That was my first impression of Mountain Home, Idaho.

And first impressions usually last. So I didn't relish the thought of spending a whole week there. After one look, I wanted to hightail it back to Boise, get on a plane and go home.

No such luck, though. I had a job to do. So I sucked it up — jumped on the grenade.

As we drove on, photojournalist Master Sgt. Lance Cheung and I looked for

the entrance to Mountain Home Air Force Base. But we had to drive another 10 miles to reach it. Curiously, stray stalks of corn grow along that road, yet nobody we asked knew why.

The base is home to the 366th Fighter Wing "Gunfighters." An appropriate name for a unit in cowboy country. We went there to report three stories [See "The Children Left Behind," November 2004, page 36; "@mountainhome," page 44 and

"Out of the Comfort Zone," page 42].

My first reaction to the town and base was typical. During my week visit, several people told me they felt like running away when they arrived. Some even cried.

What this big-city boy didn't expect was how fast the people of the town and base won me over. Made me feel at home. How quickly I felt content, like the Airmen who retire there.

Why? Maybe because Mountain Home is an Air Force town. True Air

Force blue, through and through.

Everyone's so

cheerful some people think it's an act. It's not. The handshakes of welcome, like the people, are genuine. Folks make strangers feel like "their casa, is your casa."

It grows on you. That's great. But could I live in a town of 11,000 people? How would I keep busy? I don't hunt, climb mountains or go around planting stray stalks of corn. Why would anybody want to serve, let alone retire, there?

Maybe it's better to ask: what is it

about Mountain Home that makes people want to stay?

Leslie Tomme, a young waitress at a steak, ribs and burger place a mile outside the base main gate, gave me the answer. Or at least why she, a big-city girl, decided to stay there.

"People here have a lot of pride in the military," she told me. Once an Airman herself, she left the Air Force to enroll in college. But she didn't want to return to Houston. "I stayed here because this is a good town, and the people really care about you."

She's right. After two days, people we didn't know just walked up and said, "Hey, you're the guys from Airman magazine, right? Welcome to Mountain Home."

News travels fast in Mountain Home.

One night — with a million stars in the sky — I went outside the Sagebrush Hotel to call my buddy in San Antonio, to recount my adventures. I had a doggie bag of Chinese food, which I set on the hood of our rental car. I reached for it just as a coyote did. We made eye contact. Then he turned tail and raced off, yelping to high heaven.

That's when it hit me. When I realized why people love life in Mountain Home: great people and the great outdoors for a back yard. I'd gotten an Idaho education all in one day.

Mountain Home life winds along a country road. It has a key mission. Neat homes. Children ride bikes to school. And Airman leadership school troops honor the flag at retreat each day.

But it's different. What sets it apart is the special relationship that exists between the town and base community. There's trust. I never saw a better bond during my 26 years in blue.

I learned there's a lot more to Idaho, and Mountain Home, than famous potatoes.

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas

**Leslie Tomme** is a big-city-turned-country girl who loves the slow-paced Mountain Home, Idaho, lifestyle. She works two jobs, saving for college tuition. But when there's a break, she puts on her bathing suit and spends a day drifting on an inner tube down a nearby river. "Can't do that in the big city," she said.

## An Idaho Education



by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung